

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY, EMERGING THREATS,
AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

**Christopher Shays, Connecticut
Chairman**

"Progress Since 9/11: Protecting Public Health and Safety Against Terrorist Attacks"

Room 2154
Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

February 28, 2006, 14:00 HRS

Written Testimony:

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee I bid you good afternoon. I wish to thank my Congresswoman, Carolyn Maloney, for orchestrating my appearance here today. My name is Ronaldo Vega, I am a registered architect employed by the City of New York, Department of Design and Construction (DDC). DDC was the city agency tasked by the mayor to manage the rescue and recovery effort at WTC Ground Zero. In our capacity as lead agency we had the enormous task of coordinating all of the city agencies, the four construction management firms and all of the key consultant personnel from structural engineers to surveyors. We devised the method and manner by which the rescue and recovery effort would proceed and we implemented it to the letter. I am also a union official of AFSCME, DC 37's Local 375, the Civil Service Technical Guild, representing over 6,500 architects, mechanical, electrical and civil engineers, construction managers, scientists, criminologists, examiners, etc. It should come as no surprise that our members have served in the rescue and recovery effort at Ground Zero since day one and continue even today at the medical examiners office. Along with everyone else who served at Ground Zero, my story is but one of thousands.

Much has been said and written about the days that led up to 9/11/01 and the day itself, is frozen in time for all of us. However, it is about the Herculean effort that took place in the following days, weeks and months after the tragedy, to which I address my testimony today. I am proud of what we accomplished; let nothing I say here today cast doubt upon that truth. The rescue and recovery effort at Ground Zero was indeed, worth risking our lives for.

On September 10, 2001 "all the world was right"; millions of families went about their business in blissful ignorance. But by this time, on September 11, 2001, the unimaginable death and destruction had already taken place and our way of life was changed forever. The general population became paralyzed by grief and horror. And yet our response was immediate, overwhelming, selfless and fearless. We went in blindly, first to save whomever we could and then to recover as many remains as there were to be recovered. A by-product of that search was the clean up of the site. The two operations went hand in hand; they were inseparable, human remains and debris had become one. We accomplished both efforts in nine months, but it wasn't enough for us. We left knowing our job was unfinished. You have no idea how sensitive we were to the lives that were lost that day; we saw Ground Zero as a mass grave where a senseless massacre took place. We did all we could to bring them all home, and the fact that we failed, weighs heavily on all of our minds still today. My testimony today will be tempered so as not to cause additional sorrow to the victim's families.

Four Seasons at Ground Zero, summer 2001, fall 2001, winter 2002 and spring 2002. In truth from September of 2001 to July of 2002 my office was a 16 acre hole in the ground, formerly known as the World Trade Center. We worked every weekend and every holiday. We missed every family function except those for the families of the victims. A true around the clock 24/7 operation, with ten hour shifts, sometimes double shifts. During this time your own house falls apart, your relationships fall apart and your kids get into trouble. All of your attention is focused on the recovery effort. And yet we never complained, we had a job, to do. I think our sentiments were best stated by our children. Since I worked the night shift I rarely saw my kids, before they came home from school, I'd leave for Ground Zero and I'd be asleep, when they left for school. I learned about how they felt, by the school work they left lying around the house. My wife Judy showed me a paper my son Christian had written, about how proud he was of what I was doing at

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Ground Zero. Another afternoon I found an essay my daughter Lauren had written, in it she wrote about how she worried about me and missed me but in the end she rationalized that the sacrifice was worth it, because at the very least, she still had a Daddy. Yes at the very least we still had our families to come home to, many did not. Under these circumstances, the first thing you put on hold is your emotional well being. You must swallow the sorrow, in order to function and get the job done. And so we worked and worked, day and night, until we collapsed. The mental and physical health issues were of no concern to us. We didn't want to leave until the job was done. No one wanted to get tested during the operation; for fear that the results would reveal serious health or mental concerns that would preclude them from working on the site. So we bought into the fantasy that the air and site was safe. We ignored the odors of chemicals, smoke, fire and human remains, which under normal circumstances would cause us, pause. All caution was set aside just to continue serving in this noble endeavor.

Needless to say every day offered a new traumatic experience. For many, just one minute, at Ground Zero, scarred them for life. How many scars do you suppose we carry, we who have worked, for ten hours a day, seven days a week, for ten months at Ground Zero? Some of these scars reveal themselves when you least expect them. A few weeks ago while I was at home, I got up from my chair to go to the kitchen to get a soda, while I was in there, my little grandniece Kayla decided to play a joke on me by placing her foot in the opening between the seat cushion and back rest of my chair, so that I would sit on her foot and she could kick me in the butt. Well, when I saw that seemingly disembodied foot on my chair it triggered a memory buried deep inside of me, my heart stopped, I held my breath and shuddered "oh no". I caught myself, before I broke down in tears. My daughter, Amanda, noticed my strange behavior, and asked, "What's wrong Dad, are you alright"? I answered, "Yeah; yeah I'm alright, its nothing". I hope I never have to tell anyone about the carnage I witnessed at Ground Zero.

In July of 2002, after 300 days of service, I left Ground Zero for what was the last day of the rescue and recovery effort. But before we left, we sat around the table at the last debriefing meeting and everyone had their last say. When my turn came around, all I could offer was my rendition of the song Danny Boy, I don't know how it sounded but it really didn't matter, we all cried together for the first and last time. We had combed through every inch of that 16 acre sight, until there was nothing left. The "real last truck" left at about 10:30 pm with the contents of what was brushed off the window sills of 1010 Fire House.

It was only then that I turned my attention to my own physical and mental well being. For the record I have no doubt in my mind, that my exposure to poisonous toxins at WTC Ground Zero will eventually kill me. The rule of medicine that toxins wash out of your body 90 days after exposure, does not apply to an environment that is continuously contaminating you for over ten months. Today after much effort and the help of caring organizations like the New York Rescue Workers Detoxification Project and Serving Those Who Serve Inc., the poisons that resided in my body seem to have finally washed out, but it is their path through my body and what damage they may have caused on their way out, that concerns me. My examination results confirm that eleven months after I began working on the site I still had high levels of mercury and arsenic in my blood. These toxins affect your liver and brain cells. All the dust and pulverized toxic powder that I inhaled affected my breathing. My diminished lung capacity will continue to worsen over time and if asthma doesn't get me, then liver disease probably will. There have been times since Ground Zero that my breathing has been so labored, I have felt close to death, close to being reunited with my first born son, Justin, who died in 1997, from an asthma attack. He died, praying, for one more breath. As I've stated before, working at Ground Zero was worth risking our lives for. But when the next attack comes, as we all know it will, you're going to want us there; you're going to need us there. Whether, we will be healthy enough, to answer the call is up to you. The death toll from Ground Zero is still being counted, what number will I be? If you let the best trained most dedicated responders in the world die from neglect, then, the terrorists truly win.

All I can ask of you is that you give us one more breath.

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What follows is a chronology of my mental and physical health examinations after I left WTC Ground Zero.

August 14, 2002

Dr. Alfred L. Jannicelli
Medical Associates of Wall Street
156 William Street
New York, New York 10038

- Arsenic-High
- Mercury-High
- Lactate Dehydrogenase-High
- GGTP-High
- ALT-High
- Triglycerides-High
- Cholesterol/HDL-High
- Red blood cell count-High
- Hemoglobin-High
- Hematocrit-High

See private doctor for high arsenic (12) and high mercury (12) levels.

September 9, 2002

Charlotte Nugent CSW, CASAC
Project NYCope
330 West 38th Street, Suite 1410
New York, NY 10019

- Mr. Vega is suffering from Severe Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. This condition was precipitated by his intensive long-term work at Ground Zero. Mr. Vega has "classic" PTSD symptoms including (but not limited to) flash-backs, hypervigilance, hyper-arousal, nightmares and memory loss.

September 26, 2002

Dr. Melissa Wiener
World Trade Center Worker and Volunteer
Medical Screening Program
1200 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10029

- You have a Triglyceride level of 662, which is markedly elevated and may be a risk factor for many medical conditions, including heart disease and diabetes.
- Your Liver Enzymes are abnormal (Alt-86, GGT-67), perhaps indicating Liver Disease.
- Your breathing test (spirometry) was suggestive of Restrictive Lung Disease with a response to bronchodilators. Restrictive Lung Disease indicates the amount of air taken into your lungs is less than normal. Your medical history and pulmonary function tests are consistent with asthma.

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- At the time of your examination, you complained of the following persistent symptoms: frequent headaches, sore throat, blowing your nose more than usual, runny nose, post nasal discharge, chest tightness, acid reflux, being awakened by shortness of breath, dizziness, pain in back, neck and shoulders, skin rash and irritation, productive cough and shortness of breath.

December 17, 2002

John Spielberger
Project Liberty
Choices Mental Health Center
29-29 41st Avenue
L.I.C., NY 11101

- Mr. Vega is suffering from prolonged Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The following is a list of mental and physical health providers that came to our aid when our government showed no concern:

September 2002

Janice Cilento, LMSW
World Trade Center Healing Services
St. Vincent Catholic Medical Centers
170 Broadway, Suite 1208
New York, NY 10038-4436
212 346 2583, 917 509 5203
www.svcmmc.org/wtc/office.asp

Providing continuous mental health and healing services, including group and individual therapy sessions, remembrance programs and art therapy projects.

February 2003

Jim Woodworth, CCDC, President, Carol Hamaker, Executive Director
The New York Rescue Workers Detoxification Project
139 Fulton Street, Suite 515
New York, N.Y. 10038
212 587 3961
www.nydetox.org

Detoxification program for reducing body levels of toxic chemicals.

April 2003

Nehemiah Bar-Yehuda, Project Director
Serving Those Who Serve, Inc.
STWS, P.O. Box 237047
New York, N.Y. 10023
212 877-8312
www.stws.org

Ayurvedic immune-building herbal detoxification program.

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June 2003

Susan Howland, M.Ed., Founder and Board of Trustee President
Sky Help Inc.
218 Evergreen Drive
Moorestown, N.J. 08057
877 759-4357
www.skyhelp.org

Healing trauma weekends (including EMDR), providing multi-faceted trauma intervention and on-going support services for individuals who have experienced severe stress or trauma.

April 2005

Lisa Orloff, Founder and Executive Director,
World Cares Center, Inc., September Space
520 Eighth Avenue, 11th Floor
New York, N. Y. 10018
212 563-7570
www.septemberspace.org

Committed to long term support, a safe place where anyone affected by the attacks of 9/11 and terrorism can come and seek respite. Exchange programs with Oklahoma City survivors, volunteers, responders and victims families.

Since your committee has been tasked with researching improvements in terrorism response programs since 9/11 let me offer the following recommendations for all non-uniformed personnel:

- The aforementioned organizations have provided beneficial physical and mental health services to those of us desperate enough to be proactive about our own healing. Make them part of the short term and long term solutions, the pre, during and post attack periods.
- Responders should have full mental and medical examinations, including heavy metal testing, to record their base information, before they start working or very soon thereafter.
- Responders should earn one week's additional vacation for every month, worked at the site.
- Responders should have mandatory mental health and medical screening upon leaving the recovery effort. With long term monitoring and treatment.
- Responders should have unlimited documented sick leave for incident related mental and physical injuries. Even when cost free services are available, if you don't have the sick leave available you can't take advantage of them. This would be a completely separate program from the worker's compensation system.

In Summary:

You now have tens of thousands of responders trained in the trenches and prepared to deal with the aftermath of any terrorist attack. But you are not looking after their well being.

I thank you for the opportunity to be heard and I wish you,
Peace.